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Myth 12: Gifted Programs Should Stick Out Like a Sore Thumb

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The idea of integrating programs for the gifted into the total fabric of the school program is so central to the work of the field in the last 20 years or so that it is hard to believe that the myth of separatism is still alive and well. There is little question but that gifted programs must show a connection to the work that all of public education is engaged in at the moment: raising achievement for all, attending to the needs of low-income and minority learners to help close the achievement gap, and addressing concerns about America's competitiveness in the world marketplace.

Causes of the Myth

Perhaps several forces have accounted for the mythology of separatism. One of these is the related myth of what constitutes differentiation. When I first entered the field in the early 1970s, the idea of differentiation meant doing something different for gifted learners from what was provided to other learners. So in those days it was not unusual to find programs for the gifted experimenting with computer programming, moral and ethical dilemmas, and foreign language as the curriculum base with the justification that it was different from what other students received in their curriculum diet, and it did not interfere with the scope and sequence of learning already decided on by the school district.

A second force that has kept gifted apart from the regular school program emphasis has been a separate structure for operating and administering programs, using special education as our model in all areas of program development. The problem with using that model, of course, is the need to provide a stronger curriculum and program base than the school district typically provides, and in order to do that effectively, gifted educators must be joined at the hip to their colleagues in the content areas of curriculum not placed

in silos separate from them. Often gifted education has been placed as one of the exceptionalities in both state and local departments, leading to continued habits of separatism compounded by a lack of resources to deliver the same special education models of pull-out, resource, or inclusion effectively.

A third force that has affected our ability to dispel the myth is a lingering sense of entitlement that has pervaded our program development mechanisms in schools. For example, in some school districts, programs for the gifted have argued that these students should have pool privileges, special field trips, and access to project opportunities that no one else deserves. Furthermore, some programs still operate on the premise that only the gifted can think in critical and creative ways and engage in high-level problem-solving activities and competitions. This thinking has led to legitimate charges of elitism in gifted programs and undermined the need for real differentiation, based on precocity and complexity.

These three forces then constitute the fallacies of differentiation as differentness, gifted education as an analogue to special education, and giftedness as an elitist enterprise.

The Current Problem: How the Standards Movement Went Astray

The current standards work began in the late 1980s as an effort to create national standards in each subject area that were constructed by content experts, educational experts, and practitioners in schools to design a 21st-century curriculum base, consonant with learning

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research and the newest approaches to content learning. It was grounded in a design-down model that saw adult expertise in subject areas as the desired outcome and world-class fundamental skills such as critical thinking, communication, and technology as the means to such an end. In this national model of standards, gifted students would have fared reasonably well. The floor of instruction would have been raised by focusing on higher level skills and the use of technology in creative ways. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests would have assessed learning in subject areas at more complex levels such as synthesis skills in reading, the use of multistep problem solving in mathematics, and the ability to design an experiment in science.

However, this plan was soon subverted by a “states rights” and fundamentalist orientation to education whereby it was decided that all states would have their own standards, even if those standards were inferior because of resources and time spent on their development to the national models. Once these state standards were in place, each state also felt it necessary to develop a high-stakes accountability system in the form of a state assessment test rather than using the well-regarded NAEP assessments, which would have helped us see how well we were doing as a nation in addition to as a collection of individual states. What has now resulted is a dumbing down of the curriculum and the testing in states such that instruction has become linked to test questions on the state exam, and the students of interest have become those closest to, but just below, the passing score. On top of this devolution of quality has come the impact of *No Child Left Behind* legislation, which has succeeded in wiping off the radar screen any interest in gifted students, leaving them to be the least likely to receive any form of attention in classrooms.

The Gifted Education Community Response: Capitulation or Flight

Given this context, what direction have gifted programs taken? Some have capitulated to the mantra of inclusion and placed gifted students in heterogeneous settings with the hollow promise of having all teachers differentiate instruction, based on a workshop here and there and armed with a sense that all the gifted need is choice in their activities to meet their needs. Others have gone in the opposite direction toward more separate schools and classrooms to protect the

integrity of a program for our best learners in schools that have run wild with mindless accountability and egalitarianism at the cost of being responsive to real individual differences.

Problem Solution: A Model of Appropriate Integration of Gifted Programs Into Schools

What is an appropriate response, assuming there are choices to be allowed in this gestapo-like atmosphere? Gifted education must be seen as a connected part of the schooling process for all. The standards and assessment models, as faulty as they are, constitute this basis for learning in public education. Consequently, the gifted education community must show that gifted learners have met the standards and exceeded them in core areas to free up time for an appropriate curriculum that may be accelerated and enriched in myriad ways.

Thus, advanced academic models for learning in schools in each subject area need to be built on a one-to-two grade level beyond approach that emphasizes higher level skills and processes from the beginning, provides a comprehensive articulated picture of advanced learning that culminates by Grades 9-12 in Advanced Placement coursework, International Baccalaureate (IB) coursework, dual enrollment, and early graduation from high school. Moreover, such models must provide the opportunity for students to show proficiency on the relevant state tests at ages and stages when mastery has been attained. The incorporation of this advanced model of learning alone would take us far in an appropriate yet integrated approach to serving the gifted. In its absence, gifted learners must traverse the scope and sequence of curriculum at a level and pace well below their capabilities and lose valuable learning time along the way.

Integration Through Differentiated Means

What would it take for such an integrative model to work? Clearly, supportive structures would be necessary in the form of flexible grouping, trained teachers who have met the standard of 12 hours of coursework in gifted education and content-based preparation, and advanced curriculum modules well articulated to the hallmark secondary program options cited. Yet support for such approaches has already

been voiced by the College Board through their vertical articulation program, from IB through its pre-IB options, and the openness of colleges and universities to admit students of any age for coursework if not full admission to university. It only remains for public schools to get on board in a way that would benefit up to a quarter of their students through a performance-based system of developing talent in the core areas of learning at a level and pace consonant with a student's demonstrated readiness.

Conclusion

In summary, we must confront other dangerous fallacies in our current school environments: (a) the fallacy that no children are left behind when clearly the gifted and high achieving children are, (b) the fallacy of age and grade level as the appropriate calibration for talent development, and (c) the fallacy of a single delivery system and timeframe for learning to occur. The myth of separatism must be revealed in all of its dangerous aspects so that the antidote is not worse—for example, solving the problem of the gifted by dumping them into regular classrooms without trained teachers or adapted materials or cluster grouping. The true antidote to separatism for gifted and high-achieving learners lies not in inclusion as it is now rigidly interpreted but rather in flexibility in placement and learning opportunities able to be accessed based on documented proficiency.

Further Reading

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